

# Unit Three : Myths and Literature

## Lesson 1

### Myths of Bengal

#### A. Warm up activity

- What is a myth? Look up the meaning of the word in a dictionary or on the Internet.
- What kind of myths do you think we can find in our culture?

#### B. Now read the following poem by Jibanananda Das (1899-1954) in English translation and then answer the questions either by responding to your classroom teacher in English or by trying to write down answers in your notebook.

#### I Have Seen Bengal's Face<sup>1</sup>

Because I have seen Bengal's face I will seek no more, The world has not anything more beautiful to show me. Waking up in darkness, gazing at the fig-tree, I behold Dawn's swallows roosting under huge umbrella-like leaves.	1
I look around me and discover a leafy dome, Jaam, Kanthal, Bat, Hijol and Aswatha trees all in a hush, Shadowing clumps of cactus and zedoary bushes.	5
When long, long ago, Chand came in his honeycombed boat To a blue Hijal, Bat Tamal shade near the Champa, he too sighted Bengal's incomparable beauty. One day, alas, in the Ganguri, On a raft, as the waning moon sank on the river's sandbanks, Behula too saw countless aswaths bats besides golden ricefields And heard the thrush's soft song. One day, arriving in Amara, Where gods held court, when she danced like a desolate wagtail, Bengal's rivers, fields, flowers, wailed like strings of bells on her feet.	10 14

<sup>1</sup>Translation of Jibanananda Das's "Banglar Mukh Ami" by Fakrul Alam

**C. Write down what you have guessed about the meaning of each of the following words from the context in which they have been used:**

gazing	roosting	dome	hush	honeycombed
waning	desolate	wagtail	wailed	desolate

**Now, look up a dictionary or search Google for the words to see if you have guessed the meanings of the words correctly.**

**D. Discuss the following questions with members of your group and carry on the discussion in English as far as possible:**

1. Have you heard about Chand Saudagar and Behula before? If so, in what context? Where is Ganguri and Amara?
2. Discuss with your classmates the medieval epic *Manasamangal*. Do you know of any modern Bangla versions of this epic?
3. Look up the story of Behula and Chand Saudagar from Wikipedia or Banglapedia. Make a summary in about 200–250 words.
4. How and why does Jibanananda Das use this mythical story in his poem?
5. The poem has fourteen lines and is divided into two thematic sections. What are such poems called in English and in Bangla?

**E. Discuss the following questions in pairs**

- 1) What imageries are used to describe the beauty of Bangladesh?
- 2) The poem offers a vivid description of the plants and vegetation found in the nature of Bangladesh. Make a list of all the trees, plants and birds mentioned in the poem.
- 3) What is the poet's attitude toward Bangladesh?
- 4) What is the central theme of the poem?
- 5) The poem has fourteen lines and is divided into two thematic sections. What are such poems called in English and in Bangla?

**F. Read the text from Banglapedia on the two legendary characters Behula and Chand Saudagar mentioned in the poem. Then discuss the questions that follow.**

Behula is a legendary folk heroine and one of the main characters of *Manasamangal*, a medieval epic. She was the daughter of Sayven of Ujaninagar. Lakhindar was the youngest son of Chand Saudagar of Champaknagar. Behula grew up to be a beautiful and intelligent woman and was married to Lakhindar. Chand Saudagar, a devotee of Shiva, had boasted that he was cleverer and stronger than Manasa, the snake goddess. He built an iron chamber for Lakhindar, believing it to be impregnable. However on the wedding night of Behula and Lakhindar, Manasa sent a snake to kill Lakhindar. The snake made itself as fine as a strand of hair and, entering the chamber through a minute hole, bit Lakhindar.

Behula refused to accept her husband's death. She placed her husband's corpse on a banana raft and set out on a hazardous journey towards the abode of the gods. Despite all the dangers and temptations she encountered, Behula continued her journey and finally succeeded in reaching the abode of the gods. She pleaded for her husband's life and promised Manasa that Chand Saudagar would worship her. Moved by Behula's love for her husband, Manasa not only restored Lakhindar but also his brothers whom she had killed earlier.

Behula returned home with her husband and brothers-in-law, and Chand Saodagar finally bowed before the might of Manasa. Lakhindar and Behula then returned to their heavenly abode as Aniruddha and Usa.

[from: <http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Behula>]

**Questions for discussion**

- 1) Is there a connection between the story of Behula and Chand Saudagar and the poem of Jibanananda Das?
- 2) Why does the poet use medieval Bengali legends in this poem?
- 3) What other Bengali myths/legends do you know about? Have you seen them represented in any form in popular culture?

**G. Compare the original poem in Bangla (see below) with its English translation used in Activity B. Discuss the following questions:**

- 1) How well are the tonal and formal qualities of the original poem preserved in the English translation?
- 2) What according to you, were some of the challenges that the translator might have faced while translating the poem into English?
- 3) Why do you think that the translator has kept some Bengali terms unchanged in his translation?
- 4) How far do you agree with the following comment on the translation of this poem? Why/Why not?

*“The sights and sounds of Bengal's landscape, its crowded botany and its constantly shifting lights and shadows find their way into Alam's translation.”*  
[Syed Manzoorul Islam, the *Daily Star*, December 5, 2019]

**বাংলার মুখ আমি দেখিয়াছি**  
**জীবনানন্দ দাশ**

বাংলার মুখ আমি দেখিয়াছি, তাই আমি পৃথিবীর রূপ  
খুঁজিতে যাই না আর : অক্ষকারে জেগে উঠে ডুমুরের গাছে  
চেয়ে দেখি ছাতার মতন বড়ো পাতাটির নিচে বসে আছে  
ভোরের দোয়েলপাখি-চারিদিকে চেয়ে দেখি পল্লবের স্তূপ  
জাম-বট-কাঁঠালের-হিজলের-অশথের ক'রে আছে চূপ;  
ফণীমনসার ঝোপে শটিবনে তাহাদের ছায়া পড়িয়াছে!  
মধুকর ডিঙা থেকে না জানি সে কবে চাঁদ চম্পার কাছে  
এমনই হিজল-বট-তমালের নীল ছায়া বাংলার অপরূপ রূপ

দেখেছিল : বেহুলাও একদিন গাঙুড়ের জলে ভেলা নিয়ে—  
কৃষ্ণা দ্বাদশীর জ্যোৎস্না যখন মরিয়া গেছে নদীর চড়ায়—  
সোনালি ধানের পাশে অসংখ্য অশ্বখ বট দেখেছিল, হায়,  
শ্যামার নরম গান শুনেছিলো— একদিন অমরায় গিয়ে  
ছিন্ন খঞ্জনার মতো যখন সে নেচেছিলো ইন্দ্রের সভায়  
বাংলার নদী মাঠ ভাঁটফুল ঘুঙুরের মতো তার কেঁদেছিল পায়।